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U.S. Used Many Ex-Nazis Sought For War Crimes

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On May 23, 1949, the French government formally asked the United States to extradite a former Gestapo officer named Klaus Barbie, the "Butcher of Lyons," for his role in the murder of as many as 14,000 Jews and French resistance fighters during World War II.

The request was repeated on July 20 and again on Nov. 9 of that year. Neither granted nor denied, it lay in limbo until Dec. 2, when the State Department suggested that the French ask the U.S. High Commissioner's Office in Germany for Barbie's surrender. The French did so in January, 1950, without success. A year later, Barbie was in Bolivia, living under the new name of Klaus Altmann.

State Department documents and cables uncovered in the National Archives reveal far more than an American reluctance to prosecute Barbie, who was kept by U.S. Army Intelligence in a "safe house" in West Germany while he provided information on the French Communist Party in the Lyons area.

Numerous documents in the Archives show that the State Department and Army Intelligence recruited as agents hundreds of former Nazis wanted by Soviet bloc countries for war crimes; coordinated efforts to prevent their extradition to both Eastern and Western European countries; and set up an elaborate policy network to keep them in the American and British zones of Germany, and even to allow them (like Barbie) to emigrate undercover to South America under a legitimate refugee operation code-named Safehaven.

Neither the State Department nor the Justice Department would comment on the documents or on what they implied about U.S. policy toward Nazis in the early Cold War years.

"No comment," a State Department spokesman said. "We cannot comment on anything like this, since we are now actively investigating the Klaus Barbie case," a Justice Department spokesman said.

The documents show clearly that American policy toward extradition of accused war criminals changed abruptly when the Cold War began.

The policy was also fragmented. The State Department's Office of Policy Coordination actively recruited anticommunist Russians. Quite apart from that, State and Army Intelligence took specific stands against turning over to the Soviet bloc any person who could be of use to either the United States or the communist side.

The documents also show that the Americans and British worked together formulating new policies on Nazis and their collaborators, including a decision to reject extradition requests from communist countries after April 1, 1948.

"This will be justified on the grounds of expediency and manpower and because these governments have now had more than two years to prepare their cases and marshal the necessary evidence," a British Embassy official named Peter Solly-Flood wrote his State Department counterpart on June 14, 1947.

"This course of action would have the effect of making any further requests for the surrender of traitors valueless while not actually going back on our own international undertakings to surrender proven traitors and collaborators."

Yugoslavia, then part of the Soviet bloc, had asked the United States to extradite more than 200 SS men whom it accused of mass murders. Fewer than 10 had been turned over. Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria requested more than 200 extraditions of Nazis. Poland got one; Bulgaria, two.

But Hungary and Czechoslovakia got none—partly because Czechoslovakia earlier had turned over to the Soviet Union the first two Germans extradited by the United States, and partly because Hungary refused to turn over a German general wanted by the United States.

One Nazi kept under American lock and key was an SS major named Heinz Goldacker, who commanded a battalion accused of murdering every man, woman and child in the Yugoslavian village of Alibuner—a charge confirmed by U.S. authorities.

Hundreds of Eastern Europeans who collaborated with the Nazis and then surrendered to the Americans were never extradited to their native countries. According to State Department documents, this was partly for fear that they would be executed without trial, but also because they were telling American authorities what they knew about the new communist regimes behind the Iron Curtain.

Documents in the Archives also show that some collaborators were allowed to sail to South America from Leghorn, in the U.S. zone of Italy, under Operation Safehaven, a legitimate program for displaced persons. The collaborators are not named in the documents.

At least one American diplomat at the time was appalled by what he saw.

"It is crystal clear that we have flouted our own commitments and are protecting not only quislings but also people who have been guilty of

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